The obsolescence of the monument : the future of airport icons

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The Obsolescence of the Monument, the Future of Airport Icons

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The chronic status of permanent change in airports described by Reyner Banham[1] is all the more exacerbated because these places are predisposed to technical advances as well as futuristic visions. Accordingly, whether they are emblematic of monuments to past ideals or utopias of the future, airport icons reframe the challenge of obsolescence in modern buildings.

Exploring this perspective, this paper will examine the specific case of the Trans World Airlines Terminal of the John F. Kennedy Airport in New York. Designed by Eero Saarinen, this building was inaugurated in 1962 as a part of a large complex, named *Terminal City*, whose concept was designed by Wallace Harrison for the Port Authority of New York. Twenty years after a fierce struggle with the City of New York, the authority completed an "extra-large" facility, having enlarged perspectives for the architectural community and opened a new Jet Age both glamorous and futuristic.

Closed in October 2001 following the bankruptcy of the company, the fate of the TWA Terminal then became a topic heavily hyped by the media. However, those polemics were not due solely to functional or technical issues of obsolescence. Indeed, other terminals from the 60s, like Washington-Dulles and Orly Sud in Paris, are still functioning and have been renovated with respect for their original architecture. Rather, the controversy about the TWA terminal has remained active because it crystallizes a major conflict about the representation of the future of airports. This is the specific point I want to explore in this paper. It will attempt to understand how an icon celebrated worldwide is today at the heart of a contested debate and how it might be possible to reinvest it with new meaning.

Like Orly Sud, which was inaugurated one year before, the TWA Terminal was remarkable for the way it manifested the transition of aviation from an embryonic transportation mode to a commercial one, albeit one still reserved for the elite and yet to be popularized for the masses. This profound evolution is particularly noticeable in the design of airport structures which generated different solutions around the world, particularly architectural. Orly Sud was a steel and glass megastructure, with implementation of new standardisation techniques. The building favoured a rational approach to air travel, one that Jacques Tati would enact in the first scene in his 1967 film Playtime. In New York, the TWA terminal was a large concrete structure without any interior barriers or partition walls, or any right angles. The terminal opened onto the spectacle of the tarmac horizon and balletic airplanes. With footbridges, balconies, luminous tunnels, and large picture windows, Saarinen invented a continuous and scenic route from the car to the plane, and offered new experiences of fluidity in space: "The challenge was […] to design a building in which the architecture itself would express the excitement of travel. Thus, we wanted the architecture to reveal the terminal, not as a static enclosed place, but as a place of movement and transition."[2] (Fig.1)

Figure 1.   Rendering for Trans World Flight Center, Idlewild (Now JFK) Airport, New York.
Courtesy Eero Saarinen Collection. Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.

The striking nature of this building relies in its ability to represent a total architecture, where each part is organically the consequence of the next.[3] The structure of the building is sculptural, one and indivisible, envelope, façade and floor all together. It demonstrates technological innovations like travellators, dynamic screenings or new optical illusions like oblong tunnels. The challenge was also to create for TWA a corporate building that would be distinctive and memorable given the fierce competition among air companies. Like his other commissions in the fields of automobile, television or computer manufacture, Saarinen sought "a style for a job" and considered his clients, whose influence on the mass culture would be determining, as co-designers.[4]

Architectural innovation and urban vision, which were largely present in the design of airports, had their roots in the remarkable collective enthusiasm which followed the birth of aviation. The first large air meetings which took place around 1908-1909 in Europe and the United States, publicized the invention through mass entertainment, gathering several hundred thousand people. The "spectacle of flight" then stimulated visions of the future city, where aerial vision assumed real agency as a clarifying image and a vector for the renewal of the city. This moment would inaugurate the development of an ongoing trans-national debate on "aerial cities" through a repeating process of re-conceptualization.

The building of airports is partly inspired from this imaginary. The main development of airports would accelerate after the war, with the growth of a huge aeronautic industry. This turning point catalysed a transfer from the imaginary of a city totally reformed by aerial mobility towards a specific structure, the airport, which would be an experimental place for new urban models. In this context, airports represent transitional structures between a reform imaginary and a realized alternative. [5]

Terminal City emerged in this context. In an increasingly suburban America, this concept was particularly successful. With its architectural "marvels of the world" and new technologies, *Terminal City* transported people into an experimental world. As a display of the future, the airport freely renewed attributes of urban design, testing new ideas for the future such as the leisure city, the megastructure, or the network integration.

In this environment, the TWA Terminal was not only a corporate flagship or an architectural experiment. The building also materialized the achievement of the narrative story of the aerial romance, from the air conquest to the display of an aero-city. This story continued as the airport itself became the frame for a public spectacle. Indeed, the majority of those visiting the airport were not passengers but rather a public invited to admire the special show of the airport in

movement. While Orly Sud became the fashionable place for shopping, getting to the cinema, or admiring planes from the large terraces, New York's *Terminal City* at the same moment became the hot spot for weekend outings. Skyrides, concerts and fanfares, glamorous events, all gradually created an imagery of airport spectacle. Cinema also migrated to these places; symbolic references introduced in films cultivated the buildings in the popular imagination.

If the public and popular press were largely enthusiastic about the airport, the architectural critics were less unanimous. Comparing the new airport to the eclecticism of an international fair, some observers criticized the chaos resulting from the broad architectural freedom of *Terminal City*. Saarinen's terminal was also targeted as some critics pointed out that the material translation of the concept of fluid and kinetic space was not convincing. [6]

Meanwhile, the airlines and the Port Authority were confronted with the rapid evolution of air transportation. With the arrival of the Jet Age, the congestion of aerial traffic and the introduction of new procedures, the perfect model of the future city gradually disintegrated. The petrol crisis as well as emergent terrorism aggravated the situation of air transport and diminished once more the "winged gospel"[7]. The airport's role as a suburban attraction rapidly came to an end.

However, during this period, the TWA Terminal enjoyed a worldwide reputation. Innovative airport architecture became symbolized by the iconic image of the building. Architectural photography, through the eye of Ezra Stoller, consecrated this emblematic object and the cinema regularly chose the terminal as a site for shooting. The metaphoric and literal image of the bird in flight characterized the dissemination of the TWA icon, although this image was not the original intention of the architect: "This was the last thing we ever thought about". [8]

Registered as a National Landmark in 1994, the building, however, underwent a number of reorganizations and suffered from erratic maintenance. In October 2001, a crisis began which is still ongoing. The Port Authority was pitted against several heritage preservation associations, among which figured the Municipal Art Society of New York and DOCOMOMO International.

Two perspectives summarize the lively controversy over the TWA terminal. On the one hand, the advent of the "Megaterminal" presumed the need for large renewal. Facing drastic changes in traffic and procedures, the Port Authority aimed to transform the whole airport. As for the TWA terminal, this argument translated into a project that called for cutting the structure from its satellites and reconverting the central terminal to uses other than transport. In close vicinity to the Terminal, a large terminal would be realized, dedicated to a new company JetBlue. As Mark Blacklock summed up in a book about JFK, "A massive rebuilding programme […] is designed to recapture the dream of a passenger-friendly airport. *Terminal City* is dead; long live the reborn JFK."[9] On the other hand, the iconicity of the terminal required preservation of its architectural integrity and the memory of aerial romance, which the New York Times summed up perfectly: "No amount of nostalgia will bring back the days of dressing up for air travel and eating-in-flight meal with silverware. But travellers could still revel in Saarinen's soaring spaces."[10]

Nonetheless, these two images of the Terminal, criticized as obsolete or defended as a lost paradise, do not fully encompass the debate. Far from being a pure symbol, the icon could be considered as a condenser of meanings.[11] While creating a place where passengers were both spectators of the future and actors of their own travel, Saarinen experimented with new architectural issues, partly inspired from the imaginary of the aerial city: the quest for clarification and transparency, the alliance between global culture and specific place, the design for spatial fluidity.

Significant events have recently extended the TWA saga. In 2004, an exhibition called "Terminal 5," the new appellation since TWA's bankruptcy, was planned inside the building. Curated by Rachel Ward, this event intended to use the terminal both as an art site and art object. This exhibition, publicized in New York, was to add a new perspective to the debate on the future
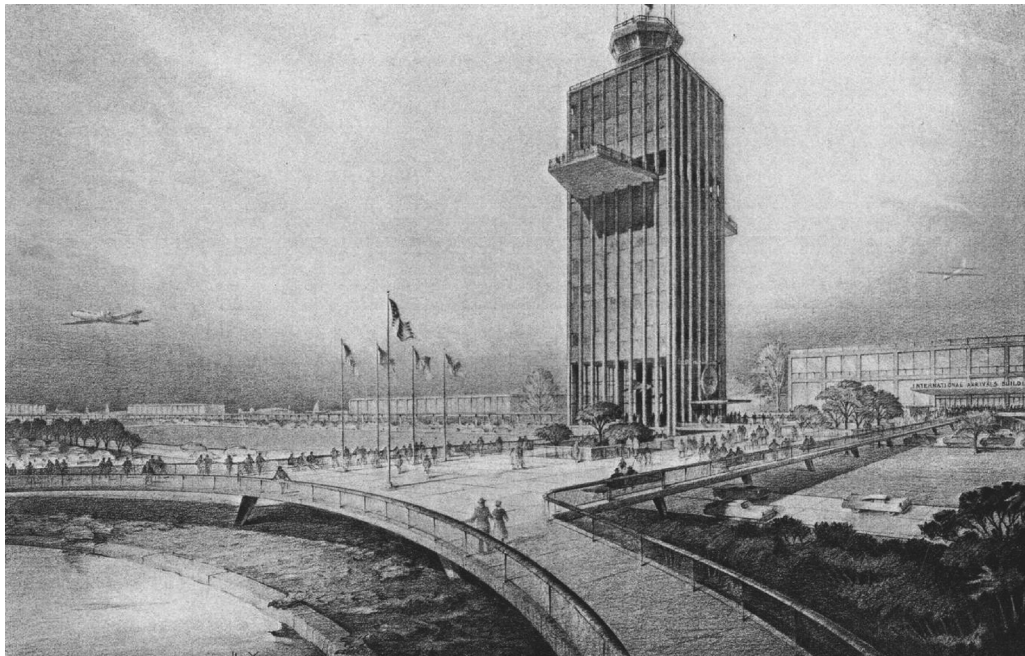
*Figure 2.   Terminal City, Preliminary design for Idlewild Airport, New York, Port of New York Authority, Rendering by Hugh Ferriss, 1955.
        Courtesy Avery Architectural and the Fine Arts Library, Columbia University in the City of New York.*

of the building.[12] Unfortunately, the day after the opening night, it was to last only one minute, as the Port Authority decided to close it down for safety reasons. Whatever the reasons for this interruption, this new critical episode again indicated the failure to activate new potentials for the Terminal.[13] (Fig.2)

2004 was also the year in which it was decided to build the new Terminal 5. Today, a 600-foot long structure has arisen close to the Saarinen building. Two former satellite buildings have been destroyed, while no specific use has yet been defined for the central terminal. The orphan tunnels serve as the only material link between the old terminal and the new one. "It is the ultimate expression of JetBlue's connection to New York", says Andrea Spiegel, the airline's vice president, qualifying the TWA Terminal as a New York image.[14] Above all, this literal splitting of the two structures underscores the failure of any ambitious regeneration of the Saarinen Terminal. Renowned designers David Rockwell and Jerry Mitchell, an architect and a Broadway choreographer, have been commissioned for the design of the interior spaces of the new Terminal 5. "Is it an airport? Is it a Broadway show? What is the difference?" says Jerry Mitchell. The two designers imagined the airport as a public theatre, where passengers would act like dancers in a ballet. Art exhibit and Broadway show: both uses theatrically renew the spectacular mediation which pervaded the aerial imaginary from the first air meetings to the week-end attractions of Orly terraces or *Terminal City* skyrides. Since this kind of space sensation was at the very heart of the original design for the TWA Terminal, it seems as if Saarinen's building is stimulating reflection of that earlier spectacular use. However, the inspiration is merely rhetorical since the place itself is still abandoned, without any planned use.[15]

While today we are often warned that the conventionality of airports contributes to the relative uniformity of our cities, the "TWA affair" demonstrates more complex and fertile perspectives. Here instead, the future of specific places, as monuments of global culture, is confronted. With its corporate identity, exacerbation of fluidity and speed, and display of the future, the airport, far
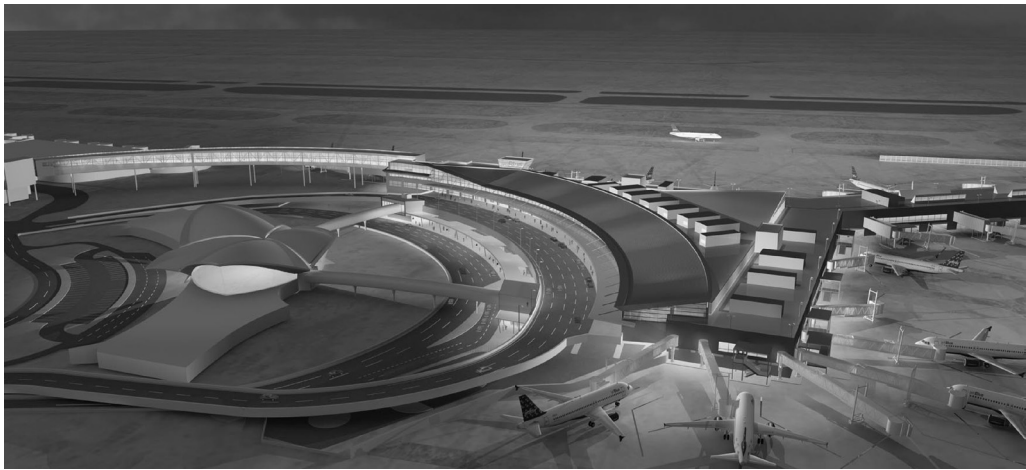
Figure 3. Rendering for new Terminal 5, 2005.
        Courtesy Gensler Architects and Associates, JetBlue.

Figure 4. Terminal 5 exhibit, 2004.
        Photo Dean Kaufman. Courtesy Dean Kaufman.

from being a non-place, could be a hyper-place, translating the paradoxical tensions between the physical environment and the acceleration of techniques, condensing hopes and deceptions for the city, compressing in one material place a sort of anterior future.

From this perspective, the imaginary represents a palimpsest of misrepresentations. A narrative architecture has emerged in the interstices between spectacle and action, between the monument to the past and the utopia of the future, between the reference and the projection. Reactivated, the immaterial foundations which built the TWA terminal and its consequent controversy might also be positively read as a fertile position for the renewal of heritage concepts.

NOTES

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